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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [KPAO](#) [BA](#) [POL](#)  
SUBJECT: PRO-GOVERNMENT COMMENTATORS CRY FOUL OVER CNN  
REPORT ON POVERTY IN BAHRAIN

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) A June 1 report by CNN reporter Hala Gorani on poverty in Bahrain caused an uproar among Bahraini pundits, who accuse the program of stoking sectarian tensions. Gorani said on the air that while the piece was supposed to cover poverty, "it almost immediately became obvious that this was a story about long-standing tensions between majority Shia and the Sunni ruling class." Columnists in pro-government papers condemned the program, saying CNN was unprofessional and biased. A writer for daily Akhbar Al Khaleej claimed CNN ran the report to blackmail Bahrain, although he could not explain why Bahrain was chosen as the target. Parliamentarians and a prominent Sunni preacher complained about the program's sectarian bent. There is an underlying assumption in many of the commentaries that CNN ran this story with the approval or connivance of the USG (in fact, Gorani did not touch base with the Embassy while in Bahrain). The Ambassador will look for opportunities to discuss the role of a free press during local newspaper interviews he will do over the next several weeks. End Summary.

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CNN Focus on Shia Poverty  
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¶2. (U) In a June 1 report for her CNN series "Inside the Middle East," Hala Gorani says that while she had planned to do a piece on poverty in Bahrain, "it almost immediately became obvious that this was a story about long-standing tensions between majority Shia and the Sunni ruling class." She mentions "decrepit housing and run-down and dirty streets in mainly Shia villages" that have not benefited from Bahrain's economic boom. A young man accuses Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa of being unaware of the plight of poor Shia in the country. President of the now-closed Bahrain Center for Human Rights Nabeel Rajab says the Al Khalifa family fears Shias could take over the government. Gorani also interviews Minister of Housing and Public Works Fahmy Al Jowder, who explains the government's past and current public housing construction projects. Minister of Social Development Fatima Al Baloushi says that jobs are available for Bahrainis but many do not want to work except in an office.

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Pro-Government Press Erupts  
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¶3. (U) Pro-government newspapers Akhbar Al Khaleej (AAK) and Al Watan ran editorials June 3 condemning the program. AAK editor-in-chief Anwar Abdul Rahman wrote a signed editorial

asking why CNN distorted Bahrain's image. He says CNN is "unprofessional and biased" and suggests that the network should do a story on the poor and homeless in America. The Al Watan article says, "It is a shame that CNN plays the role of the instigator....just to incite sectarianism in our society and other Arab societies. It is clear that the televised fabricated report is an explicit attempt to deepen sectarianism."

¶4. (U) AAK columnist Abdul Menem Ibrahim June 4 writes about a group of poor women he met when he visited the United States in the 1990s (Note: On an IV program). He complains that the CNN program did not acknowledge the assistance the Bahraini government provides for poor people in the country. He says, "If CNN had met with Bahraini professionals, bankers, women activists, academics, and businessmen, the program would have been fair. But what CNN did has harmed its credibility." Haidar Mohammed of Al Wasat writes June 10 that Bahraini government anger over the program is justified because the government "spends millions of dollars to improve the image of Bahrain abroad." These efforts "have been ruined not by any country, but by a country that is a close and major ally of Bahrain."

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America's Hidden Agenda?  
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¶5. (U) In a two-page screed June 9, AAK columnist Sayed Zahra asks, "Why do they deliberately offend Bahrain and distort its image?" The answer, he says, is to blackmail the country, "but why Bahrain, I don't know." He claims that the United States is angry that Bahrain achieved reforms that are genuinely national, proving that countries can reform without

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America's help. He also gripes that the Bahraini government does not do a good enough job getting its message out internationally, and that opposition groups outside the country exaggerate facts to harm the country's reputation.

¶6. (U) In an interview in Al Watan, four parliamentary deputies denounced the program, saying it was not realistic or factual. They accused "political movements," including the hardline Shia Haq Movement, of politicizing and exaggerating the issue of poverty. In his June 9 Friday prayer sermon, Sunni Shaikh Salah Al Jowder criticized the CNN program, particularly the assertion that poverty was a sectarian issue. He pointed out that there are many poor Sunni families in Muharraq, Riffa, and Budaiya. He asked why a channel like CNN was seeking to instigate sectarianism at this time.

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Comment  
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¶7. (C) Sunni and pro-government opinion leaders have howled the loudest about the CNN program, with Shia commentators remaining mostly silent. The underlying assumption is that the program could not have been produced without the knowledge or even connivance of the U.S. Government, which leads to talk of some kind of hidden American agenda aimed at Bahrain. Sayed Zahra even dragged in NDI, suggesting that the U.S. definitely has a specific goal in offending Bahrain this way, and perhaps that goal is to "impose on it the activities of a suspicious institute with a dark history like NDI." The Ambassador will look for opportunities in the coming weeks during planned interviews with local newspapers to discuss the role and independence of a free press.

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